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AUTHOR Clark, Kevin
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ABSTRACT

The approach taken by one school district to English-as-a-Second-Language instruction, using the whole language approach and simple children's literature, is described. It was determined that the whole language approach would challenge teachers to rethink how children come to know language and literacy and cause teachers to construct new beliefs about teaching and learning. Over 300 teachers were: trained in classroom strategies to try; asked to critically analyze instructional outcomes for this population, addressing social/affective, cognitive/academic, linguistic, and metacognitive areas; asked to implement the strategies; and provided with constructive feedback. The instructional sequence taught to teachers involved five steps: (1) recording information about students' prior knowledge and experiences as they might relate to the story to be used; (2) presenting the story in comprehensible fashion, including deliberate use of helpful voice inflection and pitch, guided questioning, and repeated key words and phrases; (3) pointing out the story's structure; (4) identifying key vocabulary, based on recall of the story; and (5) reconstructing the story orally with the children. The five-step format was found useful in challenging and restructuring teachers' beliefs about language and literacy learning. Contains six references. (MSE)

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Whole Language and Language-Minority Students: A Natural Fit

By Kevin Clark

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Check This Out

This section of *BEOutreach* highlights successful projects in language-minority education that were submitted by readers. The Bilingual Education Office encourages readers to contact the people who submitted the stories and to contribute their own articles for future issues of *BEOutreach.* Mail entries to Daniel Holt, Bilingual Education Office, P.O. Box 944272, Sacramento, CA 94244-2720; FAX (916) 657-2928.

Whole Language and Language-Minority Students: A Natural Fit

By Kevin Clark

> *We first read the world,*
> *then the word.*
>
> ***—Paulo Freire***

Near the end of 1992, a handful of teachers and administrators in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, Richmond, California, gathered one rainy morning and asked a simple question, the answer to which would affect nearly 400 elementary teachers and thousands of language-minority students. The question: How are we best going to provide English-language development to our increasing population of second-language learners?

At first glance the question seems innocuous enough but underneath strikes at the heart of teaching and learning: What do teachers need to know and be able to do so that second-language learners will learn English efficiently and purposefully? A few minutes later the group had agreed on the answer to their guiding question—whole language.

Whole-Language Approach

Whole language has at times been referred to as a program, a process, or a theory. Capturing the essence of whole language is difficult because several disciplines support its tenets and instructional strategies. Most succinctly, it is a set of beliefs about language, learning, and literacy. Its basic tenets are that (1) all learning is social; (2) language is learned through use; and (3) purpose and intention drive learning.

Cyndi Thompson elicits the Hmong word for *coconut* from a student.

For hundreds of elementary teachers in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, whole language was about to become the pillar of a theory-driven approach to providing English-language development. The approach would challenge teachers to rethink how children come to know language and literacy and ultimately cause teachers to abandon old beliefs about teaching and learning and construct new ones.

Staff-Development Process

How do you get almost 400 teachers to adopt a district-endorsed approach to providing English-language development rooted in whole-language theory? The process we decided on was to:

- Show teachers what they are expected to do. A videotape of the strategies they were asked to try was provided.
- Engage teachers in critically analyzing the instructional outcomes for language-minority students that addressed social/affective, cognitive/academic, linguistic, and metacognitive areas (Sanchez, 1990).
- Ask teachers to implement the strategies as demonstrated and bring the results to a second group meeting for debriefing.
- Provide ongoing assistance by providing constructive feedback and coaching and listening to their concerns.

ELD Instructional Sequence

Of most concern to teachers, administrators, and parents were the instructional strategies that made up what came to be known in the district as the ELD Instructional Sequence (*Note*: ELD is the abbreviation for English-language development.) Over the course of 14 months, more than 300 teachers were instructed in how to use whole language with language-minority students to develop the students' English-language skills. What follows is a look at the instructional sequence that guides the district's English-language development program. Teachers used this set of structures as originally presented to

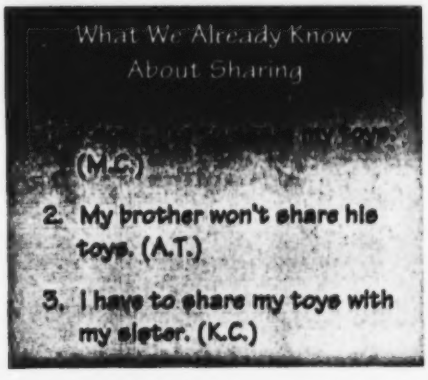
(Continued on page 25)

Five-Step Process Illustrates Principles of Whole-Language Approach

(Continued from page 24)

enable second-language learners to build English skills through the district's core literature books. The following is a brief description and example of each step of the ELD Instructional Sequence:

Step 1: Record students' prior knowledge and experiences. According to whole-language theorists, texts require contexts (Weaver, 1988). For students to understand literature, they must first draw on prior knowledge and experiences that will assist them in making sense of the story. In Freire's words, "We first read the world, then the word" (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Increasing evidence also suggests that prior knowledge overrides many problems related to language proficiency. To this end teachers solicit prior knowledge and experiences by first asking themselves how the story might relate to the lives of their students. Thus, discussion of a book about a group of children faced with a cookie shortage *(The Doorbell Rang)* could begin with a question like "What do we already know about sharing?" The teacher would then write the student-generated information on chart paper while the students provide help with spelling, punctuation, and so forth. This joint activity between expert language users and novices (Vygotsky, 1978) might look like this:



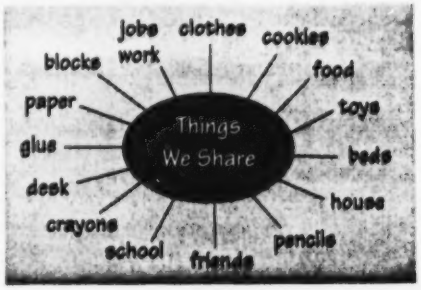
Step 2: Present the story in an comprehensible fashion. As axiomatic as it may seem, language development depends on receiving understandable messages in a supportive environment (Krashen, 1981). The messages can be made more comprehensible by a variety of teacher behaviors, many of which need to be explicitly taught and practiced. For example, English learners demonstrated higher levels of understanding when teachers deliberately used helpful voice inflection and pitch, guided questioning strategies, and repeated key words and phrases. In short, we encouraged teachers to pretend that they were reading the story to their own children in a bedtime-story manner instead of presenting it as an instructional activity.

For students to understand literature, they must first draw on prior knowledge and experiences that will assist them in making sense of the story.

Step 3: Point out the story structure. Young children are more successful in acquiring information from narrative structure than from other types of prose. In fact, literature as a discourse style is readily comprehensible to children because it is the style that complements how they think. At this step in the instructional sequence, teachers assist students in recalling, naming, and describing the four basic parts of the structure of most stories: characters, place, problem, and solution. This easy-to-use graphic organizer provides students with a framework for internalizing new and different language structures. The following is an example from *The Doorbell Rang*, a book popular with young English learners.

Characters	Place	Problem	Solution
grandma kids cousins cat	kitchen around the table in the house	There aren't enough cookies for all the kids.	Grandma brings more cookies to share.

Step 4: Identify key vocabulary. This step was the source of much discussion and disagreement among teachers. Some teachers wanted to put this step first in the sequence, convinced that preteaching vocabulary would help students to better understand the story. In fact, some teachers were reluctant to accept the whole-language version of how individuals develop vocabulary—that experiences and human interaction give rise to needed words and understandings and that getting the vocabulary from a piece of literature is the result of readers interacting with the story in ways that give meanings to words (Weaver, 1988). Once teachers had implemented the five-step instructional sequence, however, most were convinced that front-loading vocabulary was at best inefficient and at worst a waste of time. This step, which has as its goal the recall of key vocabulary from the story or related words from children's own experiences and background knowledge, is illustrated as follows:



(Continued on page 26)

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Whole Language and Language-Minority Students

(Continued from page 25)

Step 5: Reconstruct the story. What parent doesn't remember that special time when, after having been read a favorite story countless times, the child eagerly takes the book and announces: "This time I'm going to read it to you!" This reconstruction of story is one of the most important cognitive and linguistic acts that children learn to do. In this step teachers attempt to re-create the reconstruction of stories reminiscent of bedtime reading. To do so, the teacher reminds students of the story structure they created in Step 3 and asks them to retell the story while the teacher writes it on a piece of large paper. Naturally, when the students get stuck on sequence, style, or usage, the teacher provides assistance through questioning, dialogue, and rephrasing. For many teachers this step was initially exhausting yet extremely rewarding because they saw how students can actively reconstruct a story, using language. The following is an example of how a story was reconstructed with a group of first- and second-grade English learners:

The Doorbell Rang

Once upon a time there was a grandma who baked cookies for kids. She baked lots of delicious cookies. One day the kids were sitting around the table in the kitchen. They all wanted to eat a cookie. But then more kids came to the house.

And then some cousins came to the house. They all wanted to eat the delicious cookies that grandma made. There were lots of kids but not many cookies. The kids had to share the cookies. But then grandma made more cookies and gave them to the kids. Everybody was very happy.

The End

Benefits of the Five-Step Sequence

Although the whole-language process cannot readily be distilled into five or six simple steps, the instructional sequence provided teachers with a format for challenging and restructuring their beliefs about how children make sense of language and literacy. For many teachers the instructional sequence mirrored how they were already teaching and strengthened their beliefs about the validity of their work. For other teachers the sequence was the first time they saw realistic illustrations of the whole-language theory they knew. For still others, the sequence caused them to cast aside old practices that had forced many language-minority students into roles of passivity and resistance (*It's Elementary*, 1992).

Perhaps most impressive of the many outcomes of the project was the enthusiasm teachers showed in discussing teaching and learning. At a time when teachers have little time to reflect on their craft with colleagues, most teachers expressed how much enjoyment they had derived from being able to talk about teaching in an environment that encouraged risk-taking and guided reinvention of beliefs and practices. "Before this project, I just did what felt best," remarked one third-grade teacher. "Now I feel that I really know why I do what I do. And the kids love it!"

If you would like more information about the whole-language project in the West Contra Costa Unified School District, please contact **Kevin Clark** at 1092 River Falls Circle, Stockton, CA 95209; telephone (209) 478-2276.

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About the Author

Kevin Clark is an education consultant specializing in instructional strategies for language-minority students and is a lecturer in the Teacher Education Department, California State University, Stanislaus. He assisted West Contra Costa Unified School District in developing and implementing its English-language-development program.

Whole Language for Second-Language Learners

An excellent publication on whole language has been written by **Yvonne S. Freeman** and **David E. Freeman**, professors at Fresno Pacific College, Fresno, California. Entitled *Whole Language for Second Language Learners*, the volume is available for $20 each from Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801. To order, call, toll-free, (800) 541-2086.

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